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SUBJECT: SINGAPORE'S COUNTER-RADICALIZATION PROGRAM CLAIMS
ZERO RECIDIVISM, BUT SKEPTICS REMAIN

Classified By: EP Counselor Joel Ehrendreich for Reasons 1.4 (b, c and d).

¶1. (S) Summary: Singapore claims its integrative approach to counter-radicalization is effective at reducing extremism, and that there has been zero recidivism among the 41 terrorists that have been released into the community on a restricted basis. However, some independent observers are skeptical of Singapore's counterterrorism approach and do not believe that the GOS can successfully rehabilitate terrorists. Analysts noted the increasing discontent and radicalization among ethnic Malay youth and warn that some Malays may be funding terrorism abroad by engaging in distinctly non-Muslim criminal activities, such as loan sharking. End Summary.

Rehabbing Terrorists - a Total Community Effort

¶2. (SBU) Singapore uses a total community approach to counter extremism, Ustaz Mohamad Feisal and Salim Bin Mohamed Nasir, Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG) Counselors and now also analysts at the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research (ICPVTR), told Poloff during a briefing they gave on Singapore's RRG program. The counterterrorism effort is divided into three distinct sections: 1) government - which involves the Ministry of Home Affairs (in the lead), the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Community, Youth and Sports, the Ministry of Information, Communication and the Arts, the Ministry of Manpower and Peoples' Associations; 2) community - which involves the RRG and the Aftercare Group; and 3) academia - which involves research on extremism by analysts at ICPVTR.

¶3. (SBU) Following the discovery of a homegrown Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) terrorist cell in Singapore in December, 2001, officials from MHA's Internal Security Department (ISD) approached prominent Muslim leaders Ustaz Ali and Ustaz Hasbi to discuss JI's ideology and ways to counter radicalization in Singapore, Feisal said. Admitting that the ISD did not understand the religious nature of the JI extremists, the ISD officials asked if the religious leaders would be willing to

recruit volunteers to meet with the detainees and their families. The leaders agreed and the RRG was born.

¶4. (SBU) To date 38 volunteers (including Feisal and Nasir) now serve as RRG "Religious Counselors" for JI detainees. The Religious Counselors have conducted over 1,200 sessions counseling sessions with ISA detainees, and 120 sessions with the families of detainees, Feisal said. The detainees generally exhibit the following tendencies: 1) a distorted ideology; 2) promotion of violence as a means to affect change; 3) simplistic paradigms - good versus evil, us versus them; 4) exclusiveness; 5) feelings of bitterness, resentment, hatred or anger. Many of the detainees were not practicing Muslims before joining JI, and had often tried to learn about Islam when they were recruited. The detainees often had a limited, "cut and paste" knowledge of Islam, Feisal said. Families of detainees are often economically disadvantaged as they have lost their only breadwinner.

¶5. (C) Each counseling session lasts between one to one-and-a-half hours, and the counselors focus on building a rapport and teaching detainees about Islam. The main goal of the counseling is to counter the detainees distorted ideology. The ability to deradicalize extremists is directly related to "how deeply they have been immersed in JI," Feisal said. Some detainees, Feisal admitted, reject counseling and can never be rehabilitated. Escaped and later recaptured (by Malaysia) detainee and former head of Singapore's JI cell Mas Selamat Kastari refused counseling, though his family received it, Feisal said.

SINGAPORE 00000982 002 OF 004

¶6. (C) Both Nasir and Feisal admitted that many detainees are initially skeptical of the religious counselors, and initially dismiss them as government stooges. Nasir acknowledged that the primary religious body in Singapore, the Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura (MUIS), conjures skepticism in the eyes of many ethnic Malays because of its strong connections with the government. The RRG counselors therefore strive to minimize their government connections and make clear to detainees that they are volunteers who are true followers of Islam. Despite the obstacles, both Nasir and Feisal said they have had success in "de-programming" extremists. Deradicalization is a long-term process, often taking many years, but eventually many detainees do come to trust their counselors, Feisal said. In addition to meeting with the religious counselors, detainees are also evaluated by ISD case officers and psychologists. The three evaluators meet regularly to discuss progress (or lack thereof) in the rehabilitation process for each detainee. If all three parties agree that the detainee is no longer a threat to Singapore, the detainees are released and placed on Restriction Orders (ROs).

¶7. (C) Detainees on RO status are closely monitored, must regularly report in to their case officers, and must continue to undergo religious counseling sessions. Several government ministries (listed above) are actively involved in providing the former detainees with generous skill and job training assistance. "They are placed in positive environments," Feisal said. To date, 41 detainees have been released on ROs. Feisal claimed the recidivism rate of released detainees is zero, though he admits it is difficult to know for certain whether a former detainee has again become involved with extremism, if he does not engage in public acts of violence.

¶8. (SBU) The RRG has produced two counter radicalization manuals based on the experiences its counselors have had in "de-programming" extremists, Nasir said. The manuals describe the various phases detainees will move through in their years-long rehabilitation process and provide guidelines to assist counselors in what to focus on with detainees at each phase. Both Feisal and Nasir were circumspect when asked whether the RRG model could be used in

other countries, noting that Singapore being an island with a large majority ethnic Chinese population was a unique case. However, both counselors said that since most of the extremists are distorting Islam, it is key for governments to work with religious scholars and with leaders within the Muslim community to ensure that counter-radicalization efforts have any chance of success.

¶9. (C) Note: Singapore's captured terrorists are not put into the regular prison system nor are they ever brought to trial.

A legacy of the British colonial system, Singapore's Internal Security Act (ISA) permits preventive detention without trial for the protection of public security, safety, or the maintenance of public order. It gives broad discretion to the Minister for Home Affairs to order detention without filing charges if it is determined that a person is a threat to national security. The initial detention may be for up to two years and may be renewed without limitation for additional periods of up to two years at a time. Each of the extremists that the RRG counselors have met with have been detained under the authority granted by the ISA. Singapore is presently detaining twenty persons under the ISA. End Note.

Aspects of Singapore's Program have Merits

¶10. (C) John Harrison, an Assistant Professor at ICPVTR told

SINGAPORE 00000982 003 OF 004

Poloff that Singapore is on the right track with its integrated approach to counter-radicalization. When confronting radicalization, you need more than just law enforcement, otherwise all you can do is lock up the extremists and throw away the key, he said. By confronting their ideological deficiencies head on (through the RRG counseling sessions), by assisting the families and continuing to work with and monitor the detainees after they are released, Singapore has done a good job of pulling folks away from extremism, he said. The government is also keen to avoid the creation of a second generation of radicals and is smart to focus on ensuring the sons of detainees do not go down the same path as their fathers, Harrison said.

¶11. (C) One issue that scares off western governments when they look at Singapore RRG program is the word "religious," Harrison said. Western governments often view religion as an area to avoid and are thus reluctant to take a closer look at Singapore's program. It's a fallacy to look at the program as one that strictly focuses on religion, he said. While counselors do teach about Islam, the program is really about de-radicalization, and you cannot pull someone away from extremism unless you touch on all the reasons that have driven a person to engage in violence. Harrison said he recommended to the RRG that the name of the program be changed to convey that it is truly a counter radicalization program, but Singapore has not yet deigned to heed his advice.

Israelis Not Impressed

¶12. (S) However, the program has its detractors. The RRG is a joke, Israeli Embassy DCM Idit Abu lamented to Poloff. The religious counselors are all either members of MUIS, or are connected to the organization, and at least among ethnic Malays in Singapore, MUIS is tainted, and everyone sees religious counselors as government lackeys, she said.

¶13. (S) Abu expressed doubt that Singapore could effectively rehabilitate terrorists, stating that that any rehabilitation program would require the government to enjoy a strong relationship with the Muslim community; yet the Government of Singapore does not even have a good understanding of ethnic Malays in the country, let alone how and why some ethnic Malay Singaporeans have turned to religious extremism, she

said.

¶14. (S) Noting Singaporeans' lack of experience in dealing with terrorism, Abu linked her appraisal of Singapore's anti-terrorist unit with the likelihood that Singapore could effectively rehabilitate terrorists; "They are like children with guns. It's all a big game to them, and they have only avoided any serious terrorist incidents occurring here through sheer luck." If they cannot identify them, how can they reform them, she asked Poloff rhetorically.

Extremism on the Rise Among Malay Youth?

¶15. (S) Visiting National University of Singapore Senior Research Fellow Gabriele Marranci also doubts the effectiveness of Singapore's counterterrorism effort and their ability to reform extremists. Marranci, an Italian anthropologist, has conducted in-depth interviews with dozens of extremists while researching terrorism in Europe over the past ten years. Marranci has been in Singapore for over a year, and to date has focused his research on disaffected ethnic Malay youth. Marranci said while the government is correct to focus on an integrated approach to counter radicalization, the GOS is overconfident in its ability to identify potential extremists and effectively monitor

SINGAPORE 00000982 004 OF 004

released detainees.

¶16. (S) Marranci expressed concerns that there is growing discontentment among Malay youth that could provide fertile ground for the recruitment of extremists in the future. Over the past year, Marranci has interviewed 250 Malay youth (aged 13-28), 240 of whom expressed a strong dissatisfaction with life in Singapore and told Marranci they would emigrate if they could. Many Malays feel marginalized in Singapore, and extremist attitudes appear to be intensifying, he said. Marranci said that when he first meets interviewees, they almost all initially state that they are happy with their lot in life. The tune changes however as Marranci establishes a bond and wins the trust of his interviewees. Echoing others, Marranci said Malays distrust MUIS and avoid expressing any discontentment with the government while attending services at local mosques. It is only privately that the Malay youth express their growing disillusionment, he said. Some disaffected Malays turn to crime, while others, who travel to Malaysia and Indonesia, become radicalized after they come into contact with extremists there, he said.

¶17. (S) Marranci noted with alarm that ethnic Malays are increasingly involved in criminal activities that one does not usually associate with Muslims, such as loan sharking. Citing Singapore Police Force (SPF) sources, Marranci told Poloff that 19 out of 54 syndicate organizations found to be involved in loan sharking over the last two years were Malay. While he admitted he has no proof, Marranci believes the Malays' involvement in loan sharking could be an indicator of a fund-raising attempt by extremists, most likely those living outside of Singapore, he said. The GOS is not concerned about the up-tick in ethnic Malay criminal activities, because the authorities view the increase as an indication of growing secularity among Malays, Marranci said.

¶18. (S) Despite repeated requests, the GOS has not yet allowed Marranci to interview any of the ISA detainees. Reflecting on his research into extremism in Europe, Marranci told Poloff that he does not believe extremists can ever be truly rehabilitated because if they are again confronted with the stimuli which triggered the initial turn to violence, extremists "inevitably relapse; they're like alcoholics," Marranci mused.

Comment

¶19. (C) It is easy for Singapore to claim a zero recidivism rate and state its counter radicalization program is a success since no terrorist incidents have occurred here. However, the fact remains that no one really knows if "deprogrammed" detainees will ever eventually fall off the wagon. Most of the contacts we've met praised Singapore's "integrative approach" to counter radicalization, but Singapore's unique circumstances and the relative ease with which the authorities can lock the place down make it difficult to envision replication of anything more than certain small segments of Singapore's counter-radicalization effort. End Comment.

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